

Honorary members of 1990 – 1995

1990 Kenneth McKellar, William McIlvanney

1991 Bill McLaren

1993 John Major, Terry Waite

1994 David Smith

1995 Iain Crichton Smith, Douglas Fairbanks Jr

1990 Kenneth McKellar (1927-2010)

Kenneth McKellar "gained world renown for the panache and bravura of his renditions of Scottish ballads", encouraging audiences to join in with gusto and enthusiasm. He was also an accomplished singer of opera and oratorio.

He is most fondly recalled for his contributions to the BBC's 'White Heather Club', capturing the spirit of a ceilidh with Scottish dancing, songs and stories in a bothy in the Highlands. One of his most popular hits was 'The Song of the Clyde'. In 1966, he sang the British entry for the Eurovision Song Contest in Luxembourg but was placed a disappointing 9th (in the following year, Sandie Shaw won with 'Puppet On A String').

Born in Paisley, into a family keen on listening to music, McKellar was bowled over when hearing tenor Beniamino Gigli in concert in Glasgow. Though studying forestry and graduating with a BSc at Aberdeen, his singing in the university choir led to a scholarship at the Royal College of Music in London - graduating in 1947, his winning of the Henry Leslie Prize led to the title role in Thorpe Davie's ballad opera on the life of Allan Ramsay, 'The Gentle Shepherd'. After several singles for Parlophone, McKellar signed for Decca in 1954. He recorded every type of Scottish song along with operatic arias - his Handel arias were particularly loved and his recordings of lighter Verdi tenor roles were much praised.

His recordings of Burns' love songs won him a deserved international reputation and he was pleased to become president of many Burns societies both in Scotland and abroad. McKellar resisted the approaches of his friend Sir Alexander Gibson to sing with Scottish Opera, likening opera work to 'singing in a goldfish bowl', though Benjamin Britten lured him into singing Macheath in his 1965 adaptation of 'The Beggar's Opera'.

McKellar was a regular contributor to 'The White Heather Club', appearing with Jimmy Logan, Moira Anderson, Andy Stewart and Jimmy Shand. Its Hogmanay special was standard fare on the BBC for many years. He is also particularly well remembered for a BBC programme tracking a musical journey he made through the Hebrides in 1968. He did much to popularise Scottish culture and traditions, always wearing the kilt with pride and touring the US, Canada and Australia. In 2010, a week after being diagnosed with cancer, Kenneth McKellar died at his daughter's home in Lake Tahoe, California.

Letter of acceptance, written from his home in Glasgow, on 20.11.89, to Michael Thomson, Club President

Dear Mr Thomson,

I thank you for your letter of the 10th inst. and for the very kind remarks contained therein.

I thank you also for your invitation to become an Honorary Member of Irvine Burns Club.

It is with a great deal of pleasure that I accept the invitation and I beg you to convey my warmest greetings to the membership of the Club.

Yours sincerely,
Kenneth McKellar

1990 William McIlvanney (1936-2015)

Born in Kilmarnock, the son of a miner, Willie McIlvanney became a popular teacher of English at Irvine Royal Academy and was promoted to an Assistant Head post at the then new Greenwood Academy along the road at Dreghorn, so was well known to Irvine people. He also enjoyed a period at Grenoble University before leaving education to become a full-time author, gaining a reputation as “the Godfather of Tartan Noir”, novels with a dark edge set in Scotland, with their characters speaking and acting in the ways familiar to their articulate author who was also in close touch with generations of local folk. He held creative writing posts at Grenoble, Vancouver and Aberdeen universities and was Visiting Professor in the School of English Studies at Strathclyde University.

His debut book, ‘Remedy is None’ (1966), dealt with a single mother and cancer. His second book, ‘A Gift from Nessus’, was published in 1968. Both won awards, but it was his autobiographical ‘Docherty’ in 1975, which brought him the Whitbread Prize, and particularly the Glasgow-based crime novel ‘Laidlaw’ (1977), featuring Detective Inspector Jack Laidlaw, which brought him most recognition. Two more Laidlaw novels followed, and his 1985 novel The Big Man, about a Glasgow prize fighter, was made into a film starring Liam Neeson and Billy Connolly, in 1990. He has been described as “the novelist who was the voice of the authentic Scot in smoke filled pubs”.

Willie McIlvanney held that the impetus behind his books was to give flesh to “the unfulfilled stature” of the dreams of his parents and the Kilmarnock community that he came from.

Letter of acceptance, written from 40, Park Street, London, W.1, on 5th April 1936, to Michael Thomson, Club President

Dear Mr Thomson,

Thanks for your letter. Forgive my delay in answering it but I've been gipsying about a bit lately and mail is sometimes slow in catching up with me.

Your very generous invitation is both a happy surprise and an honour. To share Honorary Membership of Irvine Burns Club with some of the sonorous names already enrolled there is a bit like finding yourself picked for some Celestial Eleven on the strength of your skills with a tanner baw. But if you're game for me to line up alongside them. so am I.

I'm especially pleased to receive an invitation of this sort from Irvine Burns Club, where I've experienced a lot of happy, if sometimes eventually confused, nights in the company of such as Alec MacMillan, Andrew Hood and Harry Gaw, among numerous others. I have particularly enjoyed speaking at the St Andrew's Nights, which were invariably attended by some spectacularly attractive women.

It's a good feeling to be honoured by your own people. Wherever I live, the address on the heart is Ayrshire. Wherever I die, that's where the body should be posted. That's

where I learned Scottishness and that's where I learned, I hope, humanity - not least from the work of the man you honour.

For these reasons, I'm proud to accept your invitation to become an Honorary Member of Irvine Burns Club.

My thanks.

Yours sincerely,

Willie McIlvanney

Notes: Alex MacMillan, Andrew Hood and Harry Gaw were all prominent past presidents of Irvine Burns Club, the first named being Rector of Irvine Royal Academy.

1991 Bill McLaren (1923-2010)

Bill McLaren was born in Hawick where he still lives. He played rugby for his home town and was on the verge of a full international cap when he contracted tuberculosis, while serving in Italy in W.W.II, which nearly killed him. He was one of the first to be treated with the then revolutionary drug, Streptomycin. He went on to train as a P.E. teacher in Aberdeen, teaching until 1987 as well as coaching rugby. In 1951 he began a new career as a commentator with B.B.C. Scotland. He was to become the "voice of rugby" on B.B.C. radio and eventually television for the next 50 years and his knowledge of the game was encyclopaedic. His idiosyncratic style made him instantly recognisable. "You may never have been to Hawick, but you know they'll be dancing in the streets when you get there."

The retirement of Bill McLaren marked the end of an era for rugby in the same way that the retirement of Murray Walker left Formula 1 a different sport.

Bill McLaren was honoured with an MBE (1992) and an OBE (1995). He finally retired from the B.B.C. in 2002 and, in the same year, became the only non-international to be inducted into the International Rugby Hall of Fame. In 2003 he was awarded the CBE.

His dedication to his wife, his family, his work and his beloved town of Hawick make him a role model for the youth of today and a very fitting and welcome Hon. Member of Irvine Burns Club.

(contributed by Peter McGlone)

Letter of acceptance, written from his home in Hawick, on 12/1/91, to Dr Peter McGlone, the 1991 President

Dear Mr McGlone

It was most kind of you to invite me to become an Honorary Member of Irvine Burns Club and I appreciate the compliment very much indeed.

I am not much of a social type, more a kind of part-recluse who is happiest in his own home and who doesn't attend dinners or other functions unless absolutely essential so I don't see myself as much of a catch as an honorary member but if you can accept such a 'puir craitur', I happily give my consent with my thanks for such a delightful gesture on your part.

With my best wishes for your Club's future success

Yours sincerely

Bill McLaren

1993 John Major (1943-)

John Major, elected as the MP for Huntingdonshire in 1979, succeeded Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1990, serving until 1997, bringing his mild-mannered style and moderate political stance to the position. Among other achievements, he replaced the Poll Tax with the Council Tax, led the UK negotiations over the Maastricht Treaty, privatised the railways and the coal industry and played a pivotal role in creating peace in Northern Ireland. In 1991, the Provisional IRA attempted to assassinate him by launching mortar shells at 10 Downing Street. He was knighted in 2005 for services to politics and charity, and further honoured in 1999 for his work on the Northern Ireland peace process.

Letter of acceptance, written from 10 Downing Street, London, on 16 December, 1992, to Jim Butler, Club President:

Dear Mr Butler,

I was very flattered to receive your letter inviting me to become an Honorary Member of the Irvine Burns Club. I am delighted to accept and take great pleasure in wishing your distinguished club every success for the future.

Yours sincerely,
John Major

Notes:

The letter, apart from the beginning and end, is typed.

1993 Terry Waite (1939-)

Terry Waite was the Assistant for Anglican Communion Affairs for the Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1980s and he is best known for being kidnapped in 1987, while travelling in Lebanon to try to secure the release of four hostages. His captivity, till 1991, was not the longest period of captivity suffered at the time (see 1996 Honorary Member Tom Sutherland) but, owing to his church position, was possibly the best known. He had, in 1980, successfully negotiated the release of several hostages in Iran and, in 1984, successfully negotiated the release of four hostages, held in Libya, in talks with Colonel Gaddafi.

Following his release, he was elected a fellow commoner at Trinity Hall, Cambridge (the address on his acceptance letter) and devoted himself to study, writing, lecturing and humanitarian activities, his first book being *'Taken on Trust'* in 1994. He was knighted in the 2023 Birthday Honours for services to charity and humanitarian work.

Letter of acceptance, written from Trinity Hall, Cambridge, on 26 November, 1992, to Jim Butler, Club President

Dear Mr Butler

Thank you very much indeed for your recent letter on behalf of the Directors offering me honorary membership of the Club.

I am very pleased to accept, and my signature is included as requested.

Yours sincerely
Terry Waite

Notes:

Apart from the signature, the letter is typed.

1994 David Smith (1921-2008)

Born in Barrhead in 1921, David worked latterly as a traveller for plumbers merchants including Thomas Graham and John Richmond. His love of football was one of his passions and, despite a trial for Glasgow Rangers coming to naught, he remained a lifelong supporter of the club.

His footballing ability was, however, recognised elsewhere and after seeing service in Gibraltar during World War Two (as a drummer in a Cameron Highlanders band) and, to quote him, "finishing the war without firing a shot in anger", he was asked to sign for Burnley but declined - he had lost a 17-year-old brother through a football-related injury and did not want to put his parents through worry in that direction. He did play for both Motherwell and Kilmarnock, finally finishing his senior playing career with Stranraer.

David was happily married to Madge, a native of Sheffield, and it was as a couple that they were recruited by Irvine Burns Club Secretary Andrew Hood in 1975 to act as curators to the Club and Museum. David, with his encyclopaedic knowledge and boundless enthusiasm for Burns, and Madge, with her practical, organisational skills, were an immediate hit with the Directors and members of the Club and the very many letters received both by David and the Club in the intervening years are a testament to the open, outgoing friendliness with which he has charmed the public ever since.

A keen golfer, a weel-kent after-dinner raconteur and performer, a man with enthusiasm and a pawky sense of humour, David also found the time, with Madge's help, to have four daughters of whom he was inordinately proud, leading, by the time of his death, to six grand-children and five great-grand-children.

In 1993 Andrew Sinclair, the then President, felt that David's contribution to the Club had been such that the offer of Honorary Membership was made. David accepted and continued for many years to present the public face of Irvine Burns Club with the same relish and keenness he demonstrated in the seventies.

(contributed by Eric L Park, President 1994-95)

Letter of acceptance, written from Irvine Burns Club, on 22nd January, 1994

Dear Drew,

Please accept my most sincere thanks for the great honour & compliment you have paid me in nominating me as your Honorary Member, and to the Directors of the Club for endorsing my nomination.

It has been an honour & privilege in itself to have served the Club as Curator along with Madge from 1975 until 1985, & more recently on a part time basis.

Over the years I have been very proud to show & explain our Honorary Members letters and I never imagined my own letter would be included in this illustrious collection.

I can think of no higher accolade and my thanks to all, and particularly to yourself
Drew.

Yours most sincerely
D M Smith

Notes:

The letter is on Irvine Burns Club headed paper, as appropriate, and addressed to Andrew Sinclair, the President who nominated David for Honorary Membership.

1995 Iain Crichton Smith (1928-1998)

One of two generations of Scots poets immortalised in Alexander Moffat's 1980 painting "Poets' Pub", Iain Crichton Smith was a novelist and a story teller as well as a poet though he always considered himself to be primarily a poet.

Capable of writing sublime poetry and prose in both English and Gaelic, he spent a large proportion of his life working as a schoolteacher in Clydebank and Oban.

Born in 1928 in Glasgow he moved to the island of Lewis two years later where he spent his childhood and youth, being profoundly influenced by the culture of the Western Isles. He attended Aberdeen University and after National Service entered the teaching profession but, around 25 years later, in 1977, he tendered his resignation and became a full time writer. Such was his standing in the literary world that in 1980 he was awarded the O.B.E.

Perhaps his most famous novel, "Consider the Lilies", was written in 1968, a tale of the Highland Clearances which must have been inspired by the many deserted croft houses and empty 'ferm touns' scattered across the highlands and islands. His poetry, in English, includes "A Life", his rhyming (mostly) autobiography "Ends and Beginnings" and "The Leaf and the Marble".

The Scottish Poetry Library web site states that "Crichton Smith wrote poems of lyrical candour and great human understanding as well as poems that speculated on the course and meaning of human existence." That he was a great literary figure is beyond doubt but, from personal experience, I know that he was a warm, self effacing and kindly human being who once enthralled an audience at the Harbour Arts Centre in Irvine with the beauty of his poetry and the hilarity of his stories. Iain died at Taynuilt in 1998.

(contributed by Eric L Park, President 1994-95)

Letter of acceptance, written from Willow Point, Nelson, British Columbia, on February 8th 1939, to Eric Park, Club President:

Dear Mr Park,

When I look at the signatures of famous men you have received over the years, I feel very conscious of the great honour you have done me. Such a constellation it would be hard to beat.

May your club continue to flourish as successfully as it has done for many years, and as your booklet so impressively shows.

Many many thanks for the honour you have done me.

Yours with all best wishes,
Iain Crichton Smith

1995 Douglas Fairbanks Jr (1909-2000)

Douglas Fairbanks, Jr, has been described as "the swashbuckling actor who was a real-life war hero and friend of royalty". His father was the superstar of silent films, and he himself made his own mark in 80 movies, including 'The Prisoner of Zenda' and 'Sinbad the Sailor'. He himself said: "I've led an enormously lucky life . . I've done what I wanted to do. I worked hard and played hard, and it was all just tremendously rewarding."

He adopted London as his home from 1950 to 1970, becoming a favourite of royalty. He and his wife knew how to entertain - the first time Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip came to dinner, he had two singers to perform for them - Maurice Chevalier and Cab Calloway. King George VI gave him an honorary knighthood for 'furthering Anglo-American amity'. He was the first American officer to command a British flotilla of raiding craft in a commando operation during the war; his naval service brought him a chestful of medals.

Fairbanks claimed to have had affairs with Marlene Dietrich and Gertrude Lawrence and was one of the contenders in the mystery of the headless man photographed with the Duchess of Argyll in the 1960s.

His movie career began at age 13 in 'Stephen Steps Out', his stage career began in Los Angeles in 1927, and his career picked up with the arrival of sound in the early 1930s.

Irvine Burns Club Past President Jack Lovie and his wife met him on a Cunard liner in 1994, enjoyed his company and suggested he become an Honorary Member, leading to the acceptance letter below. Later in 1994, that year's President, Eric Park, wrote confirming the offer and Fairbanks' reply is also in Club files.

Letter of acceptance, written on 12 June 1994 on CUNARD paper headed: Queen Elizabeth 2 - Mr & Mrs Douglas Fairbanks Jr - Cabin 8184, to Jack Lovie, the Past President who met him on that voyage:

Dear Mr Lovie,

I am both flattered and honoured that you would think to invite me to join the Irvine Burns Club as an Honorary Member. It so happens that rare books, letters, poetry and writing of all kinds are a passion of mine. Indeed, I could not be more pleased to accept your invitation.

I hope you have enjoyed the voyage as much as we have and that we might have the chance to exchange "hello's" before disembarking tomorrow.

Again thanks -

Douglas Fairbanks Jr

Notes:

Following the meeting on the 'Queen Elizabeth II', that year's President, Eric Park, wrote to him that August, and his reply is also filed.